



THE PRESERVATION OF
AGRICULTURAL LANDS
SOCIETY (PALS)

*Working to Protect the
Best Farmlands in Canada
Since 1976*

Spring 2025

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PRESIDENT'S LETTER

Dear PALS Supporters,

As Canadians pitch in to buy local food these days, I can't help thinking back to the late 1980s when Canada/USA free trade plans were in the headlines, and many citizens, including PALS members and farmers, rallied on both sides of the Niagara Falls Canada/US border bridge. Shortly after, we started our "EAT CANADIAN I LOVE NIAGARA FRUIT" mail logo campaign. It was very popular, and Regional Niagara planners used it on their correspondence, while farm groups in other provinces joined in with such slogans as "EAT CANADIAN I LOVE PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND POTATOES." Today, as US Tariffs loom and Ontario's prime and specialty crop farm lands are threatened by a multitude of destructive Provincial Policies and Municipal development plans, these vital food growing lands must be protected.

The difficulties land preservationists will face in the months to come, were clearly illustrated by our unsuccessful efforts to stem the development tide onto Niagara Greenbelt lands at last October's Ontario Land Tribunal hearing. Here, as Victor Doyle, former lead Ontario Government planner, and our 2025 AGM panelist, noted "PALS put forward a valiant, very strong case before the Ontario Land Tribunal". However, it was subsequently dismissed by a biased Hearing Officer who put the needs of the Church proponent ahead of local, regional, provincial, and most concerning, Greenbelt Plan protections.

This is a bleak planning time in Ontario, what with 97% of OLT development hearings approved; only land owners able to appeal developments; and, Bill 5 enabling the Government of Ontario to bulldoze sprawl along speedily. Nevertheless, the upcoming Provincial Greenbelt Review, allows PALS an opportunity to go forward with a "bold vision" to expand and strengthen protections of Niagara's Greenbelt Tender fruit and Grape Lands and all prime farmlands in Ontario.

We will keep you posted.

Doug Woodard

ACROSS THE PROVINCE - by Dr. John Bacher (PhD)

Assaults on Farmland Beyond Tinkering with Planning Act:

In the past several years, the provincial government has made a number of negative changes to the Planning Act and its associated policies, which encourage urban sprawl on Prime (Class One to Three) agricultural lands. Essentially these are about the removal of restrictions against municipalities to re-zone these lands to permit urban development.

Now, new legislation contained in the proposed law called "Protect Ontario By Unleashing Our Economy Act, 2025" has been introduced. And if approved, it will give the provincial government new tools to foster sprawl outside the existing urban envelope. The most deadly of these is their new powers to designate Special Economic Zones (SEZs).

In such areas existing laws and environmental protections can be over-ridden. Also, within the SEZ provincial rules regarding environmental assessments, zoning and species at risk, can be nullified to expedite development on rural lands. The law also establishes new powers for what are termed "trusted proponents" for special projects that obtain cabinet approval, and includes provisions to block judicial appeals of the special powers. The law could also be used for what are termed Strategic Industrial sites on prime farmland.

A Synopsis of Planning in Niagara Falls 1980 to 2025:

When the distinguished land use planner, Len Gertler, wrote his 1980 influential study on Niagara's unique farmlands for the provincial government, he identified areas he referred to as the "shadow" fruit belt south of the Escarpment, close to the Niagara Falls and the Fonthill Kame. He found that these lands had significant grape and tender fruit production but were not predominate in the agricultural landscape. PALS had some of these lands added to the Greenbelt, both in its initial formation and subsequently during a ten year review.

Also, quite importantly, with the help of Jean Grandoni, sister of a PALS founding member and farmer, the late Peter Grandoni, we were able to have some of these lands in North West Niagara Falls denied an urban expansion, initially by the Ontario Municipal Board, (OMB), and later through defeating a judicial appeal of this decision.

In recent years PALS has lost some of the shadow fruit belt lands through the manipulative fashion in which the Niagara Region undertook to develop a new Official Plan. Without any right of appeal, PALS lost lands in North-west Niagara Falls to an urban zoning expansion, which had been kept out of the urban boundaries by both the OMB and the Superior Court of Justice. These two areas of urban boundary expansions in the shadow fruit belt are now going through a Secondary Plan review, where PALS has played a lonely role, being the only advocate for protecting the considerable natural heritage features here, which include forested wetlands that are important for breeding amphibians. So far, there have been no amphibian-call surveys, which are supposed to be conducted this Spring, after which a final recommendation on the future of these lands will be made by the Niagara Falls Planning Department. In addition to the North West lands, a Secondary Plan is being developed for the headwaters of Beaverdams Creek, which provides a contribution to St. Catharines emergency water supply.

Next year the City of Niagara Falls will develop a Secondary Plan process for another area of agricultural land within the shadow fruit belt which was added to the urban boundaries through the new Niagara Official Plan process. These lands, located near the new Niagara south hospital site, surround a provincially significant wetland.

PALS has also played a difficult role in the debate regarding the proposed Uppers Lane Walker Industries quarry facility. One of its controversial features is the relocation of a tributary of Beaverdams Creek, which is important breeding habitat for a significant Niagara game fish, the Northern Pike.

According to opponents of this project, PALS has made reviewers at the Department of Fisheries and Oceans aware of this by revealing the past failure of the relocation of the Ten Mile Creek. Approved over twenty years ago by an OMB hearing, a study by Walker Industries conducted for an expansion of its sanitary landfill, found that any life, let alone fish, was not present in the relocated channel of the Ten Mile Creek.

Addendum: Approval of Niagara Regional Plan Demonstrates That Natural Heritage Designations can be Generous

In our comments regarding the new Secondary Plans PALS recognizes that the decision to expand the urban boundaries of Niagara Falls has been made, and that there will be an inevitable removal of agricultural designations. However, in our comments we stress that the extent of the designation of Natural Heritage features should be generous, in part as developments since the approval of the urban expansions by the region, demonstrate a reduced lack of need.

One aspect of the lack of need is the redevelopment potential for residential purposes of the Marine Land Property. Another is the approval of a manufacturing facility in Port Colborne related to electric car vehicles. The past need calculation that justified urban boundary expansions for the Niagara Region was based on an allocation of its residential needs to other municipalities, on the assumption that its vacant lands zoned for urban development would not be used even within the expanded 30 year planning framework. Since there was no actual re-zoning of land in Port Colborne, it is reasonable to assume that given the benefits of the area to electric car manufacturing, helped by the community's over a century-long association with nickel refining, that these Port Colborne vacant lands inside its urban boundaries will be eventually fully developed within the normal 30 year planning framework.

AROUND THE NIAGARA REGION

Notes from PALS March 26th 2025 AGM:

Synopsis:

Speaker: Victor Doyle, former lead Ontario planner - 2002-2018

Victor first reminded us of how our bounty of Class 1 soils, climate and proximity to the Great Lakes makes Ontario farmland nationally and provincially significant, supporting a highly valuable and integrated agri-food sector generating massive amounts of GDP and jobs. He noted that government initiatives over the decades have been aimed at growing the sector and that this is an opportune time to refocus those efforts given the threat of tariffs.

A green-themed poster for the PALS 49th Annual General Meeting. At the top left is the PALS logo with the text "Preservation of Agricultural Land Society" and "Working to preserve the best farmlands in Canada for future generations". To the right are three small images: a field of crops, a tractor in a field, and a sign that says "EAT CANADIAN ASK FOR ONTARIO FRUITS AND VEGGIES IN YOUR SUPERMARKET". Below these is the quote "Ontario Farmland Protection must be First and Foremost in a Tariff Threatened Province!". The main text reads "PALS 49th Annual General Meeting - Wednesday March 26th, 7 PM. on Zoom" and "Featuring Speakers on the frontline in battles to protect the best farmlands in Canada from urban development and Provincial Planning Policy threats." At the bottom are three speaker portraits with their names and titles: Victor Doyle (Greenbelt - Originator and PPS Expert), Rav Singh (National Farmers Union - Ontario Highway 413), and Kevin Thomason (Land Expropriation in Wilmot County).

He then spoke to the significant, continued loss of farmland and that protecting farmland needs to be strengthened to help grow the sector and sustain it for perpetuity. However, while Ontario has 40 different pieces of legislation dealing with the agri-food sector/farming, the Greenbelt Act is the only one specifically pertaining to the protection of farmland.

Meanwhile, the Ford Government has been dismantling existing farmland protection policies through watering down the Provincial Planning Statement – allowing unfettered urban/settlement area expansion - and repealing the Growth Plan for the Greater Golden Horseshoe. It simultaneously removed land use planning authority from regional governments which had been the lead in protecting agricultural systems since the 1970's – instead turning over control solely to local municipal councils which are far more easily influenced by development interests. {note: and now have Strong Mayors powers}

One of the good news stories is that the Greenbelt remains intact, and that it specifically delineates the Niagara Peninsula Tender Fruit and Grape Specialty Crop Area – with the strongest farmland protection policies in Ontario. He spoke to PALS putting in a very strong case before the Ontario Land Tribunal to try to help defend the Greenbelt Plan on a massive expansion of a church but that the Tribunal relied on vague wording and misinterpretation of the Greenbelt Plan policy restrictions on the expansion of non-agricultural uses to approve it. The valiant and important effort by PALS points to the need to fine tune and clarify any ambiguity in the Greenbelt Plan during the upcoming 10 review.

Having led the development of the Greenbelt Plan, he shared that it was directly through the advocacy of PALS and other like-minded individuals – including progressive regional planners from years past – that the Niagara Peninsula Tender Fruit and Grape Specialty Crop Area were included in the Greenbelt and subject of such stringent protection policies.

On the good news front, he advised that the Federal government has abandoned any notion of a new international airport on thousands of acres of farmland in Pickering it expropriated in the 1970s and that the government has signalled that some or all of the land may be added to the Rouge National Urban Park. Advocates have been advancing a case to support this with an agricultural vision for the lands including new opportunities for young farmers and farm related housing options in two of the area hamlets.

He closed by noting that 2025 is the 10-year review date for the Greenbelt Plan. Given the Government's irresponsible removals of land from the Greenbelt (which it reversed under severe public pressure and scathing Auditor General and Integrity Commissioner reports) along with other regressive actions (like removing the Greenbelt as a component of the Grade 9 Geography curriculum and allowing unfettered urban expansion onto farmland) that PALS needs to be vigilant and diligent in following any announcements about initiation of the Review and to participate both locally and provincially in the conduct of the review.

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AND DONATIONS**

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Canada Helps at CanadaHelps.org or by e-transfer: for the e-transfer payee,
please use **The Preservation of Agricultural Lands Society**
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Scenes From PALS 2025 Blossom Walk *Photography by Natalia Shields*



Rows of pink blossoms and yellow dandelions against a brilliant blue sky....a visual delight!!



Dynamic duo PALS Board members Gracia Janes & Liisa Harju pause for a photo on their Blossom Walk.



A Vineland pear orchard in full bloom.

ATPH
THE PRINTING HOUSE